

Bisexual orientation cannot be reduced to arousal patterns

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In their article, Jabbour et al. (1) claim to demonstrate “robust evidence for bisexual orientation among men,” but their research is guided by problematic assumptions about, and definitions of, sexual orientation, bisexuality, and arousal.

First, it is well established that sexual orientation is multidimensional [inclusive of identity, attraction, arousal, behavior, etc. (2, 3)]. Thus, the authors’ narrow definition of bisexual orientation as being “sexually aroused and attracted to both sexes” is not in line with the scientific literature. In addition, the authors assume that different dimensions of sexual orientation should be coincident even though it is well established that this is not always the case (3–5). The expectation of alignment normativity—that different dimensions of sexual orientation should align (6)—is an implicit research assumption that has been used in harmful ways to delegitimize bisexuality (7). Furthermore, the authors’ stated goal was to determine “whether men who identify as bisexual have sexual arousal patterns that are also relatively bisexual,” but they examined sexual arousal in relation to scores on the Kinsey scale, a measure of attraction and/or behavior rather than identity (8).

Second, the authors define bisexual orientation as “substantially sexually aroused and attracted to both sexes,” but “substantially” is subjective and “both sexes” is rooted in binary and cissexist notions of sexuality [e.g., it assumes that there are only two sexes and it ignores gender diversity (6, 9)]. By comparing arousal patterns to scores on the Kinsey scale, their research reinforces a conceptualization of bisexuality that implies that “true” bisexual men are equally

attracted to women and men. This is inconsistent with their earlier use of a definition that referenced “substantial” (rather than “equal”) attractions, and it is inconsistent with how bisexual people describe their own attractions (9). In fact, sexual minority people in general, and bisexual people in particular, do not feel that the Kinsey scale captures the nature of their sexual attractions (10).

Third, the authors’ approach assumes that physiological arousal is the most valid dimension of sexual orientation and that it can therefore be used to assess the veracity of self-reported identity or attractions. In addition, research on physiological arousal is dependent on the stimuli used in studies. The authors state that “for men, sexual arousal to attractive women or men is arguably equivalent to sexual orientation.” Again, this goes against the accepted definition of sexual orientation as multidimensional (2), and it requires physiological arousal to conventionally attractive women and men, which does not account for the variability in what people perceive as attractive.

Finally, the authors overextend and sensationalize their findings. Given their conflation of sexual arousal and sexual orientation, their results do not provide “robust evidence for bisexual orientation among men.” Instead, their results suggest that, among cisgender men, Kinsey scale scores are associated with physiological and self-reported arousal. The existence of bisexual orientation among men was never really in question. Framing their research as “robust evidence” for bisexuality among men only serves to contribute to the controversy, rather than to resolve it.

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